

Trinity Sunday

God so loved the world

Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17

For millennia humanity has tried to find ways to describe God, write about God, compose music about God, create artwork to depict God. Oftentimes what we end up with is not so much an image of God, but an image of what we think, want, believe, need God to be.

I am reminded of the story of a primary school teacher who was giving a drawing class to a group of six-year-old children. At the back of the classroom sat a little girl who normally didn't pay much attention in school. In the drawing class she did. For more than twenty minutes the girl sat with her arms curled around her paper, totally absorbed in what she was doing. The teacher found this fascinating. Eventually, she asked the girl what she was drawing. Without looking up, the girl said, "I'm drawing a picture of God." Surprised, the teacher said, "But nobody knows what God looks like." The girl said, "They will in a minute."

Is God delineated on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo, or heard in Handel's Hallelujah Chorus? Do we see God peeping from behind a mighty mountaintop, or glimpsed through the canopy of a fully-leaved summer wood, or hinted at in the delicacy of a single rose, or playing humorously with us as He dances through the shifting colours of the Aurora Borealis?

I wonder if there is a temptation to spend so much time trying to describe what God looks like that we forget to spend time thinking about and reacting to what God does. Both are important, and we should never stop trying to describe God because that is part of the relationship we have with God. As our lives and circumstances change and develop, so our understanding of what God

is like should change and develop with us. If we still have in mind an image of God that hasn't changed since our childhood, then I think there is a problem. Paul writes wisely in Corinthians:

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, (or woman), I gave up childish ways." It may be that is one of the great problems of the Church today. We haven't grown our relationship with God into something that is mature and adult and fitting the context of our lives today. Nothing about God is static. One of the great medieval theologians Thomas Aquinas speaks of God as being pure action. There is something restless and overflowing about God, Who never stands still. Movement and energy and action is not only Who God is, but what God does.

This Sunday is called Trinity Sunday. How can we even begin to describe the mysterious dynamic of God's inner being? How can we make it seem relevant to our everyday lives that it matters how we understand God to be Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer and Comforter.

For me it has always been helpful to realise that God has many facets and dimensions. Above and beyond human gender, yet sometimes identifiable, in the Bible, as Father *and* Mother. Human and vulnerable and weak, as Jesus was, yet also miraculous, healing and divine, as Jesus also was. Fire, water and wind, as the Spirit was, yet also comforter, creative energy and inspirer, as the Spirit also was.

This dynamic expression that is God, perfectly relating to the world, perfectly involved in the world, affected by the world and what happens to us, God is also the fellow sufferer who understands what it is like to be us. But also this God of movement and the dance.

This idea of a dancing God, slightly unsettling for douce Presbyterians, is in fact an ancient one. We have in our hymnbook the 1963 Sydney Carter hymn, Lord of the Dance, which sees Jesus dancing through His ministry all the way from Creation, to Crucifixion to Resurrection. "I am the

Lord of the dance, said He." It may have its roots in the old English traditional carol, "Tomorrow Shall be my dancing day" which goes back to the time of the sixteenth century, maybe even medieval times, where the life of Jesus is repeatedly characterized as a dance.

Sydney Carter writes about 'Lord of the Dance',

I see Christ as the incarnation of the piper who is calling us. He dances that shape and pattern which is at the heart of our reality. By Christ I mean not only Jesus; in other times and places, other planets, there may be other Lords of the Dance. But Jesus is the one I know of first and best. I sing of the dancing pattern in the life and words of Jesus.

Whether Jesus ever leaped in Galilee to the rhythm of a pipe or drum I do not know. We are told that David danced (and as an act of worship too), so it is not impossible...Sometimes, for a change I sing the whole song in the present tense. 'I dance in the morning when the world is begun...'. It's worth a try.ii

Do you want to dance? Sounds like the beginning of an old-time chat-up routine. "Are you dancing? Are you asking? I'm asking. Then I'm dancing!" But it is a challenging, intimate, but ultimately inclusive image to think of God and how God interacts with us, as a Church, and as individuals. The choreography of faith is all around us: from the entrance of the Church Officer with the Bible, followed by the choir followed by the Minister; the elders and young people weaving amongst the seats as the offering is gathered and then processed to the communion table and lifted up to God; the Minister's movement from pulpit to table and to the steps of the chancel for the Benediction; the intricate weaving of the people who serve the tea and coffee in the St Matthew Hall after the service. All these patterns, all this choreography built into our Sunday activities. The routine, and the different steps at baptisms and communion. The engagement of the congregation and God as we reacquaint ourselves with each other, and the dance of faith goes on.

From the heart of the Trinity which is suffused with love, a Father so loving the world that we are given His Son; a Son so loving the world that He offers His life for healing and hope and new

beginnings; a Spirit so loving the world that she breathes possibility and delight and comfort into all of us. Our faith is full of dance and rhythm and music and texture and colour. Sunday, and the days in between if we would but look.

As we dance the dance of faith, sometimes confident about the steps, sometimes tripping over our two left feet, sometimes knowing the tunes, sometimes dancing with friends and strangers, this dance of the Trinity with the people of God brings wholeness, healing, grace, and peace. The dance goes on. The movement that is God continues to move, God continues joyfully, indefatigably, to create the dance of mission and service to the community and to the wider world.

There are some who would comment that the Church is a tired institution without a place in the modern world; that it should sit at the edges of contemporary life like so many wallflowers. Out of step with what is going on in the world today and with nothing to say or offer to a world that has moved on. Has friendship and hospitality gone out of fashion? Has questing after answers, or even formulating the questions about life and its meaning become irrelevant? Has comforting the sad and lonely become unnecessary? Has feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving a drink to the thirsty, visiting the imprisoned, standing up for the persecuted, speaking out for the marginalised, enabling acts of charity become a thing of the past? Not that Churches and people of faith have the sole rights to such things, but my God, how much we give and share and offer to a world grown selfish and introspective and indifferent.

When I was an undergraduate at Oxford, I never imagined that the Scottish Country dance steps I learned in a primary school gymnasium in Penicuik, and a High School Assembly Hall in North Berwick, would be of any use. But within weeks I found myself part of the Oxford University Scottish Country Dance Society, the most powerful group in the whole university, and where I learned all my Machiavellian political skills as I clawed my way to the Presidency! Alongside

perfecting the pas-de-basque and pousette, and slip-step, and teapot and promenade. Making friends for life. Whenever we learned a new dance, we always walked it through so the patterns and moves became familiar, and remembering what was our left hand, and what was our right hand. Having mastered those basics, and still a bit nervous, we put the music on, and we were off, guiding and prompting. Sometimes moving steadily and with dignity because we couldn't quite remember what came next but it still looked impressive!

On Trinity Sunday, with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Creator, Redeemer and Comforter, we may still be walking through the steps of the dance of faith, learning new things. Preparing for the moment when the music plays, and that first chord sounds, and we bow, and propel ourselves onwards to the glory of putting our faith into action. As we dance it may be the hands of God that we hold, or it may be the hands of our fellow humans we hold. But we dance, and we move, and that interwoven relationship of faith and hope and love comes into play and blesses our lives and the lives of those around us.

God so loved the world, for so many reasons. On this Trinity Sunday, may that love inspire you further in your dance of faith. The music has begun. Step up, step out.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ I Corinthians 13:21

ⁱⁱ Sydney Carter, Green Print for Dance